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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

H FOR CODEL CROWLEY

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR CODEL CROWLEY

¶11. (SBU) Everything and nothing has changed since your last visit to Bangladesh in January 2004. The economy continues to grow annually at a robust 5-6 percent, but infrastructure and other problems prevent real inroads on poverty reduction. The feared loss of jobs in the garment industry with the end of MFA quotas failed to materialize; indeed, garment exports last year rose 27 percent. JMB's stunning campaign of terror in the second half of 2005 finally forced the Bangladesh Government to acknowledge that terrorism and extremism exist in Bangladesh, but domestic politics remain as polarized as ever. One positive development is the government's increasingly consistent protection of Ahmadiyyas from Islamist bigots. The general election expected in January 2007 remains crucial to Bangladesh's future.

Extremism

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¶12. (SBU) The Jamaat ul-Mujahideen (JMB) came close to traumatizing the country in early December. While its violence claimed only 32 lives over a span of several months in a country of 144 million people, the randomness and nationwide scope of the attacks scared many normally complacent Bangladeshis into wondering if they might be next. The ruling BNP and its coalition partner Jamaat Islami (JI) showed signs of strain as even some, mostly dissident, BNP MPs criticized the government's handling of the crisis and questioned the rationale of the BNP-JI coalition. Predictably, as they do after any incident of high-profile violence, BNP and AL leaders blamed each other. But by the time the Id holidays arrived in January, the mood had shifted, thanks to the halt in violence following major arrests and weapons recoveries in December. Unless and until the violence resumes, the BNP will continue to claim it has largely "broken the back" of JMB.

¶13. (SBU) BNP leaders say:

-- The total rejection of JMB violence by civil society, including Muslim clerics and Islamic scholars, underscores that Bangladesh is still a tolerant, moderate country with no stomach for extremism.

-- Islam is a religion of peace, so no Muslim could accept JMB's actions.

-- Since terrorism and Islam are by definition mutually exclusive, we should look at who benefited from JMB's violence. The answer is those (read India and the Awami League) who seek to defame and destabilize the country.

¶14. (SBU) Awami League president Sheikh Hasina, on the other hand, asserts that BNP and JI instigated the violence to distract people from the government's multiple governance failures. As proof of their complicity, she cites the four BNP ministers widely linked to JMB leader Bangla Bhai.

Elections

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¶15. (SBU) Bangladesh's zero-sum political culture makes any election a winner-take-all affair, but the 2007 general election is make or break for the two major parties. For the BNP, victory shatters the strong anti-incumbency bias of Bangladesh, and South Asia, that has denied any Bangladeshi administration a second term in office. It would also position Tariq to succeed his mother as Prime Minister in the next five years. For the AL, defeat or boycott implies ten years out of power, a bitter pill for a party that prides itself as Bangladesh's rightful ruler. There are divisions in the Awami League, but its leadership threatens to boycott the election without major changes to the caretaker government and electoral systems. The BNP indicates it might consider some electoral reforms but categorically rejects caretaker changes.

¶16. (SBU) With both the AL and BNP attached to the politics of money and thuggery, there is every reason to think the next election will be extremely turbulent. The BNP's stacking of the Election Commission in January is the latest example that it can act clumsily to advance its perceived political interest.

**¶7.** (SBU) Polls suggest that support for AL and BNP is neck and neck, with a large undecided bloc. However, there is strong popular confidence in the integrity of the electoral system, which suggests the AL could have a hard time justifying a boycott. Whether the issue was attacks on the AL leadership, terrorism, rising commodity prices, or acute energy and power shortages, the AL has repeatedly failed to generate serious political pressure on the government to hold early elections.

**¶8.** (SBU) The AL's recent return to Parliament is probably a temporary tactical expedience to avoid losing its seats to non-attendance. However, the return was widely welcomed, and the first several days of parliamentary debate have been reasonably civil and free of procedural controversy.

**¶9.** (SBU) The BNP says:

-- It is committed to a free and fair electoral process because, as the stronger party, it wants the will of the people accurately reflected.

-- The re-election of the AL mayor in Chittagong last year, and the upset win of an independent Hindu in a JI safe seat in December, underscores the current system's impartiality.

-- The real problem is the AL does not practice what it preaches on democracy. It boycotts parliament and spurns offers of inter-party dialogue in favor of confrontation on the streets. The USG should urge it to change course.

**¶10.** (SBU) The Awami League says:

-- BNP/JI alliance moves to fix the election leave it with no alternative to boycotts and hartals absent early elections and major changes to the caretaker and electoral systems.

-- The BNP/JI alliance is out to eliminate the AL as a viable party.

-- The USG should recognize and do more to counter the imminent threat posed by Taliban-like Islamists to Bangladeshi society.

-- Assertions by two recently sentenced JMB leaders, Sunny and Awal, that they had a relationship with the AL's religious affairs secretary, and Sheikh Hasina confidant, are a torture-induced lie.

#### Religious Minorities

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**¶10.** (SBU) The ban on Ahmadiyya publications remains hung up in the courts and essentially unimplemented. After some slippage in April 2005, the Bangladesh Government has acted effectively to protect Ahmadiyya mosques from seizure by Islamist bigots. In December, as many as 70 demonstrators were hospitalized after clashing with police as they tried to march towards the Ahmadiyya central mosque in Dhaka.

**¶11.** (SBU) Hindus have previously reported problems at elections because of their presumed support for the AL. We are increasing our monitoring of this potentially vulnerable group to detect any negative trends well in advance of actual polling.

CHAMMAS